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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1492
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SUBJECT: KHUJAND'S NEW AIRPORT TERMINAL: AIR TRANSPORT GONE WRONG

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Tajikistan's northern industrial hub Khujand's airport is outdated and lacks adequate security features, but corrupt government officials refuse to open an existing two-year old modern terminal next door. The spacious, light-filled terminal with computerized processing and first-class security screening equipment is so impressive that it reportedly caught President Rahmonov's personal attention in 2004, and his family demanded a 51 percent stake in it. Even when the private investors finally agreed to those terms, government demands for more bribes have kept the modern terminal from opening. END SUMMARY.

GOVERNMENT REFUSES TO OPEN NEWLY-BUILT MODERN TERMINAL

¶2. (SBU) A modern air terminal in the northern industrial capital Khujand remains vacant because investors cannot pay off enough government officials to open it. PolOff visited the impressive \$2 million air terminal connected to the existing Soviet-era air terminal April 3 at the invitation of several private Tajik investors from the Nur Company that built the new terminal. Completed in 2004, the new facility is light and spacious with glass walls throughout. Security equipment meets international standards, and the customs area is completely transparent with glass partitions. Computerized passenger processing systems can handle up to 300 passengers boarding an hour. There is even a duty-free area for travelers on

international flights, and a large comfortable waiting area with adequate seats and a restaurant. Other amenities include 13 restrooms and a large, paved, efficiently allocated outdoor parking area.

13. (SBU) The problem is that the air terminal is too nice and modern, and reportedly garnered President Rahmonov's personal attention. Investors obtained central government approval to begin construction in 2003, but when Rahmonov visited Khujand in 2004, his eyes lit up when he saw the new structure and asked, "Who built this?" Immediately after his visit, the investors were denied permission to open the terminal, despite having passed all government inspections and being internationally certified. Over the past two years, the investors tried to pay off the right people but the final word was that a 51 percent ownership stake was needed to pass to Rahmonov's family. The investors agreed to this, but still no official permission has been forthcoming. Big money is at stake - if just a \$10 transit fee is tacked onto each passenger and 400,000 passengers transit annually, profits from that fee alone would be about \$4 million.

(COMMENT: That the bright modern terminal is superior to the outdated, dank one in Dushanbe likely also plays a role, considering the north-south rivalry in Tajikistan. END COMMENT.)

SORRY AND UNSAFE STATUS OF CURRENT TERMINAL

14. (SBU) Entering Khujand airport transports the traveler back half a century. The flight arrival board is a crude large chalkboard with a mishmash of flight information. The check-in area consists of a door off to the side through which passengers push and shove to have all their baggage weighed. The best way to figure out which flight is boarding is to ask why the others are gathered around the door. Baggage over 20 kilograms requires extra fees, of course - but this can be "negotiated." What passes for security is troublesome. There is no equipment to screen baggage; passengers are instead simply asked if they have any knives with them. Some luggage is given the most

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cursory of inspections, with inspectors asking if everything is "packed clothes." Few people bother to walk through the single decrepit metal detector and nobody is required to do so. PolOff did not utilize the pungent restroom facilities, but the smell permeated a good part of the terminal.

15. (SBU) Tajiks in the government or with money, as well as diplomatic delegations, can bypass the main air terminal altogether and use the Soviet-era VIP lounge and check-in services which are much better than the main terminal. But most Tajiks and other travelers cannot afford this luxury. There is also a new, luxurious, and free-standing "VVIP" terminal at one end of the airport for President Rahmonov's personal use. At the other end, is an almost as impressive "CIP" terminal for "Commercially Important People" who pay 50 somoni (\$15.50) to use the separate processing and waiting area.

WHAT DO BUSINESSMEN THINK?

16. (SBU) While many businessmen lament the poor quality of service at the airport and by Tajik Air, nobody strongly advocated that the new terminal open. Businessmen often hesitated to express their opinions, and claimed that they heard the airport did not pass "inspection." One businessman even told PolOff he heard the "basement pillars" were unsound. Local businessmen gave little thought as to how increased airport traffic and additional international flights (possibly by Russian or Chinese carriers) could expand their own production and customer base. One large clothing manufacturer that flies its products out of Tashkent for express orders to Italy did concede, however, when directly asked, that Khujand airport might be a cheaper option.

"TRAGIC AIR"

17. (SBU) The near monopoly and abysmal customer service of Tajik Airlines (sometimes jokingly called Tragic Air by English

speakers) pervades Khujand airport. During PolOff's return flight to Dushanbe on April 6, the flight was abruptly canceled 45 minutes prior to departure to combine two flights to maximize passenger load. All passengers from PolOff's 4:30 pm flight were told to depart on the 6:30 pm flight. Everyone then milled throughout the airport, strategized how to get one of the few available chairs, sat on the floor, or smoked outside the entrance (any semblance of a security screening was lost) until 10:30 pm, when Tajik Air finally admitted that there would be no flight to Dushanbe because of an evening thunderstorm.

18. (SBU) When PolOff finally boarded the Dushanbe-bound flight 16 hours later, things did not go any better. With no computerization of the reservation or seating system, it is a free-for-all to get the "best" seat. Capturing a prize seat near the door afforded some wisps of breeze while the plane sat on the runway for an hour until Tajik Air was able to round up enough passengers to fill every single seat. But another delay was in store because one official realized the cargo hold was 600 kilograms overweight, and the plane could not take off. Much discussion on what to dispose of took place (PolOff had squished into her seat with all personal luggage on the floor and lap to avoid this contingency). The "overhead compartments" were full and closing them was not required, nor was turning off cell phones or other electronic devices. The aroma of cigarette smoke wafted from the flight attendants' area next to the emergency oxygen supply early on during the flight to Dushanbe - which took all of 40 minutes.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: The modern and upgraded air terminal

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standing unopened next to the existing dilapidated and unsecure structure represents a growing Tajik investment dilemma (ref C). Corruption seriously impedes economic progress. In some cases, businesspeople no longer know who to pay off to get results - the bribe requests just get greedier and greedier. Khujand now has the luxury of being a destination in demand for many travelers going from Dushanbe to Tashkent because due to Uzbek-Tajik tensions there are no flights. Dushanbe travelers fly to Khujand and then take a taxi across the border to Tashkent. There could surely be a daily flight between the two capitals that would greatly benefit business, but President Karimov, we are told, refuses to authorize such flights. Finally, there is a great opportunity for increased regional flights. The Afghan air carrier Kam Air now flies from Kabul to Almaty. A Kabul-Dushanbe-Tashkent-Almaty flight would almost surely be profitable - if the governments could agree. END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND